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Giedre Sabaseviciute



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Re-creating the Past: The Manipulation of the Notion of Rupture in Egyptian Revolutions

Giedre Sabaseviciute

- 1 In March 2009, members of two Egyptian parties, the New Wafd and the Nasserist Party, clashed at a conference held to commemorate the 90th anniversary of the Egyptian revolution of 1919. The conference was meant to discuss its relation to another Egyptian revolution, known as the July revolution of 1952. While the Nasserist Party – the heir of the July revolution – criticized the 1919 revolution for its supposedly bourgeois character, the New Wafd party – which claimed the legacy of 1919 – asserted that the 1952 revolution was led by a handful of officers and resembled more a military coup than a genuine popular revolution. Rather than reconciling the two revolutions, the conference ended up with several senior Wafd members walking out in protest.
- 2 This debate reflects a long lasting historical rivalry between two main social upheavals, commonly referred to as “revolutions”, which occurred in the 20th century Egypt. In 1919, hoping to curb the rising national movement in Egypt, the British authorities, *de facto* rulers of the country since its occupation in 1882, arrested and exiled leaders of the *Egyptian Delegation (al Wafd al Misri)* which was formed to negotiate Egypt’s independence at the Versailles conference. The arrest of Sa’ad Zaghlul a popular national leader sparked an uprising in March-April 1919. The uprising sporadically continued until 1922 and was beset with the acts of civil disobedience, demonstrations, massive strikes and riots. In 1922, Egypt was granted partial independence and a year later, in 1923, a constitution. A few decades later, in July 1952, a group of young army officers known as the Free Officers Movement led a military coup which resulted in the overthrow of the monarchy and the ending of British occupation in 1956. Contemporary tensions between the New Wafd and Nasserists as illustrated in the cited example derive precisely from these conflicting interpretations of Egyptian past and history, in particular, the problem of where to place its historical rupture, in 1919 or 1952.

- 3 In this paper, I discuss the different strategies employed in marking the revolutionary rupture at two moments of political change, between 1919 and 1923 and in 1952. By analyzing historiographical literature produced in the aftermath of each moment, I seek to demonstrate how a revolutionary rupture can be denied, replaced or reinstated by subsequent revolutions in order to reaffirm its own revolutionary character. In order to have a complete picture of Egyptian revolutions, I include the account of what came to be considered as the first national revolution – the revolt led by Ahmad Urabi in 1881-1882, which was first marginalized then rehabilitated by the July revolution of 1952¹.
- 4 Given the fact that, in the national historiography produced after 1952 the very notion of revolution seems to be synonymous with that of rupture, I will draw a particular attention to the use of the term of “revolution” (*al thawra*) and the transformations of its meaning. Far from trying to answer the question of whether these moments of political change were genuine revolutions that induced an objective rupture, I seek to replace the question on the level of perceptions : why and when these moments of political change came to be perceived as “revolutions”?
- 5 Does historiography provide adequate sources for analyzing the perceptions of revolutionary ruptures? In an extremely well-documented study on the formation and evolution of the Egyptian historiography, *The Gatekeepers of the Arab Past: Historians and History Writing in Twentieth-Century Egypt* (2009), Yoav Di Capua convincingly demonstrated that the formation of modern history was intimately linked with the birth of the idea of nation as “Egypt was forged as an ultimate subject of historic inquiry”². The conviction that only history can provide answers how to achieve modern Egyptian nationhood acted as a guiding thread for the Egyptian historical project. As a result, it was history that was used as the main basis for instituting various competing projects of modernity. The desire for change, understood as the transition from the actual state of affairs to the imagined and constantly redefined modern nationhood accompanied Egypt throughout the entire 20th century. Couched by the first reformist intellectuals in the idea of “there is no nation under tyranny”, the belief in revolutionary action was maintained as the means to create a modern nation. Because of the interconnected character between nation, revolution and history, Egyptian historiography well reflects the perceptions concerning the evolution of Egyptian history and its ruptures.

Ahmad Urabi's movement: revolution or revolt?

- 6 Referred as “the first Egyptian revolution” several decades later, the movement led by the Colonel Ahmad Urabi is deemed to be the first expression of a truly Egyptian national consciousness. The Urabi movement initially started as a protest against poor socio-economic conditions of the army and discriminatory practices of the Turco-Circassian military elite against “native-born” Egyptian soldiers. Influenced by the ideas of political reform that were circulating through political clubs and Masonic lodges attended by intellectual, military and political elites, the officers added a constitutional program to their demands. As a result, some intellectuals joined the movement. The majority of them were Syrian Christians, who played a crucial role in the literary movement of Arab culture revival, known as *Nahda*, and in the formation of a new political culture of protest in Egypt³.

- 7 The Urabist movement succeeded first in having a Circassian minister of war replaced by their own candidate and then, in forcing the ruler, Khedive Tawfik, to appoint a new head of the cabinet, Sharif Pacha, who was charged to draft a constitution and to convoke the Chamber of delegates. However, a confrontation between the newly elected cabinet, backed by Khedive, British and French councils, and the Chamber, supported by officers, soon arose over the control of country's budget. As a result, fissures erupted between Egyptian and Syrian intellectuals and the latter group defected from Urabist cause. Growing Urabists' recourse to Egyptian nationalist rhetoric nourishing anti-foreign sentiment has probably alienated Syrian intellectuals who, as subjects of the Ottoman Empire, advocated pro-Ottomanist ideas and were naturally opposed to any signs of Egyptian territorial nationalism. Mounting sectarian tensions culminated in a bloody riot in Alexandria in July 1882, followed by the British bombardment of the city and military occupation of the country.
- 8 The relevance of the Urabi movement to our point is twofold. Primarily, the account of the movement recorded by intellectuals in their journals and history books informs us how the event was perceived in its aftermath and helps us to grasp the shift of its future historiographical representation. Secondly, given the popularity of the idea of constitutional reform at the end of 19th century and the fact that Urabi's movement was partly motivated by constitutional demands, it is relevant to ask whether the event was considered as a revolution by intellectuals who supported it.
- 9 In the second half of 19th century, the debate on the reform (*al Islah*) occupied the foremost place in the Ottoman intellectual circles. The reform was seen as a necessary means to strengthen the Ottoman Empire and rescue it from its supposed decline vis-à-vis the flourishing West. Ottoman intellectuals borrowed its ideological content of the French Revolution, considering it as a universal movement which, having originated in the West, was inevitably spreading all over the world to bring about the rule of law, natural rights and individual liberties. Significant in this respect was Adib Ishaq, a Syrian intellectual who settled in Egypt in 1881. He described reform as a flame, which was first lit in the French Revolution and then spread to north to Germany and to Russia, where it respectively took the forms of socialism and nihilism. The flame also reached the East inspiring the movement of Babism in Persia, leading to the deposition of Sultan Abdul Aziz in Istanbul followed by the adoption of the Ottoman constitution in 1876⁴. In general, the reform was defined as an inevitable culmination of history characterized by the adoption of the constitution and the end of absolutist rule. Was the Urabi movement perceived as an integral part of this universal movement of the reform, similar to that which was underway in the Ottoman Empire?
- 10 Though Urabi revolt was not so much linked to such a movement of reform as Ottoman movement was, the articles written in support of the constitutional government in Egypt and directed against the despotism of the authority suggest that Urabi movement was considered, at least before the fall of Sharif pasha's government, as a rupture and a revolution. Its revolutionary character was in particular advocated by the "native" Egyptian intellectuals, the most virulent among which were Abdullah Nadim and Ya'qub Sannu. They widely popularized the Urabist cause within Egyptian masses by writing in colloquial Egyptian instead of classical Arabic which was not accessible to illiterate Egyptians⁵. For instance, Abdullah Nadim perceived the Urabi's movement as a rupture between the new and old eras. He subsequently changed the name of his journal from *Tankit wa Tabkit* into *al Taef* which was to become the official organ of Urabists⁶. On his

behalf, in his satirical journal *Abu Naddara al Zarqa* published in Paris, Ya'qub Sannu called the movement "Egyptian Revolution" and considered it of his own making⁷.

- 11 The case of Ottomanist intellectuals was different. While speaking about the reform, their eyes were primarily turned to the Ottoman Empire where the constitution had just been suspended in 1878, only two years after its adoption in 1876. Thus most probably they viewed the Urabi movement as a part of the greater Ottoman reform. Given the fact that their idea of revolution was intimately linked to their nationalist consciousness, Ottomanist intellectuals could not view the events in Egypt as being some kind of exclusively Egyptian revolution. This is the reason why these intellectuals, after a short-lasting appreciation of Urabi movement, withdrew their support when its nationalist undertones became too loud.
- 12 Unsurprisingly, the account of the Urabi revolt left by intellectuals in their private newspapers and history books was predominately negative. We can observe two prevailing tendencies. First of them, promoted mostly by Ottomanist intellectuals, was a tendency to separate Urabi movement from its constitutional demands and to put emphasis on its final and violent stage. This view was supported by intellectuals who tended to explain the failure of Urabists in terms of Egyptian immaturity for constitutional government. The account of Syrian intellectual Gurgi Zaydan on Urabi movement is representative of this view⁸. The second tendency was mostly espoused by the young generation of Egyptian nationalists who blamed Ahmad Urabi for having caused British occupation⁹.
- 13 The question of whether the Urabi movement was perceived as the revolution is further complicated by the ambiguity of the Arabic term for revolution, *thawra*. The term *thawra* does not correspond exactly to *the revolution*. In its classical usage, the word *thawra* meant "stirring up" or "arousing" and etymologically has hardly anything to do with the term *revolution* which derives from Latin "revolvere" and was originally applied to express the action by a celestial body of going round in an orbit or elliptical course. Thus while *thawra* means the ongoing insurrection or revolt seeking for the change, the term *revolution* implies that the change has already taken place. Tellingly, the term *thawra* was not used to designate the universal movement of change described by Adib Ishaq. In the Ottoman context, intellectuals seem to have preferred the concept reform (*islah*) while reserving the term *thawra* mostly to the European revolutions, the foremost among which was the French Revolution. Such a cautious use of this term is probably linked to the violent dimension that the concept implied and the fact that intellectuals recommended to avoid violence in seeking for political change. Their reluctance to call for revolutionary change is logical given the fact that the majority of intellectuals were still patronized by the rulers. In addition, in 19th and the beginning of 20th centuries, the term *thawra* carried negative meanings, associated either to sectarian riots or secessionist movements from Ottoman Empire, such as those which were underway in Ottoman Balkan province¹⁰. Unsurprisingly, if the term *thawra* was used to designate Urabi's movement, it was done mostly by intellectuals who emphasized the violent stage of the movement, as Salim al Naqqash¹¹ and Gurgi Zaydan. It is important, however, to mention that Urabi himself called his movement *thawra* in his memoirs, written in 1882, and intended to clear his name of charges of mutiny. The title of the memoirs, *Unveiling the Secrets of Egyptian Awakening (al nahda), Known as Urabi Revolution* indicates that the term was widely used to designate Urabi movement. Nevertheless, the positive term *nahda* (awakening) most likely was kept to overshadow the negative concept of *thawra*.

1919 revolution: the undefined rupture

- 14 The main task of this section is to find out whether the 1919 revolution was perceived as the event having generated a historical rupture. By 1919 revolution, I mean here a set of events ranging from the formation of the Egyptian delegation (*al Wafd*) in 1918, the popular uprising in 1919, partial independence in 1922 and adoption of the constitution in 1923. My second task is to determine which of these moments was chosen as rupture in Egyptian national history.
- 15 In historiographical literature produced between 1920 and 1946, two major tendencies seem to prevail: an almost complete lack of interest in both the Urabi's movement and 1919 uprising and a tendency to focus on the actions of the Wafd and its leader Sa'ad Zaghlul. With one exception which will be treated later, not a single book was explicitly devoted to 1919 revolution under this period. Historical books on the revolution start to appear only after the World War II with the publication of *In the Aftermath of 1919 Revolution* in 1946 by a nationalist historian Abdul Rahman al Rafii. Interestingly enough, the majority of historical studies produced after 1919, focused on the history of royal dynasty in the period stemming from the French expedition in 1798 until the British occupation in 1882. Such a restriction of the subject matters of history was contingent on the genesis of historical science itself. As already mentioned, the formation of history in Egypt was inextricably linked to the birth of the idea of modern nation. Thus, the search of roots and formation of the Egyptian nation at the end of 19th century was of primordial importance to those historians who, consequently, did not devote any historical attention to the uprising of 1919. A tight censorship imposed by the monarchy in attempt to preserve the dynasty's historical image played certainly a role in the restriction of subjects of history. At the same time censorship alone can not account for the absence of historical works on the uprising of 1919. Some historians adventured themselves in writing the national history that contested the royal history and the repressive means, such as book banning or denying access to the archives, did not seem to discourage them¹². Moreover, in Egypt until present day censorship is usually enforced by intellectuals themselves employed as censors. Thus, it seems that the restriction of subjects of history was dictated rather by the lack of interest in recent events which was shared by the Egyptian intellectual community.
- 16 The first history book of a nationalist historian Abd al Rahman al Rafii entitled *Patriotic Societies. A History of Nationalist Awakenings* and published in 1922 gives insight into his perception of Egyptian events. Though the book is devoted to foreign, mostly Western revolutions, in its introduction the author presents the state of the national struggle in Egypt. Without mentioning the 1919 uprising or the formation of the Wafd, al Rafii places some kind of rupture on the World War I considering it as the beginning of "a new stage of history characterized by the freedom of nations and their right to self-determination". The national struggle is considered as still in its beginnings, but the victory is viewed as inevitable because it is determined by the course of History. By stressing the role of patriotic societies in organizing the national struggle, al Rafii "forgets" the 1919 uprising and hints that it was the war that marked the rupture between the past, characterized by the "stagnation of nations", and the present, perceived as something to move through into the future. The book *Egyptian Question and the Wafd* written by a contemporary of the revolution Mahmoud Abu al Fath in 1922 presents a similar case. The author extensively

narrates the adventures of the Wafd in its bargaining for independence from 1918 till 1921, but does not devote a single line to the uprising of 1919. Similarly, of 14 lines given to the 1919 uprising in a biography of Sa'ad Zaghlul by Muhammad al Buhayri *'Ibraat al Sharq* (1927), six are devoted to human losses, while the event is called both a "movement of disobedience" (*harakat al-'isyan*) and *thawra*.

- 17 The first tentative to rehabilitate the 1919 revolution was made by the renowned Egyptian writer Tawfiq al Hakim. In his famous novel *The Return of the Spirit* written in 1933 he dedicated last two chapters to the 1919 revolution which was portrayed as a national force stemming from the people that unexpectedly came into the surface. Abbas al Aqqad, another famous Egyptian poet, as well viewed the 1919 revolution under the positive light in his biography of Sa'ad Zaghlul in 1936. However, the fact that the biggest part of the account is devoted to the justification of violent incidents that took place during the revolt suggests that the prestige of the 1919 events was rather at low ebb¹³. Such a negative assessment of the 1919 uprising prevailing at that time could be explained by the general distrust of "masses", considered as naturally irrational and violent. A revolution, understood as a mode of change led by the "masses" was strictly disapproved by intellectuals. Nevertheless, cognizant of the need of change and influenced by echoes of the French Revolution, some intellectuals accepted the revolutionary idea but only if it was orchestrated by the elites from above, thus, equating the notion of the revolution to that of the reform¹⁴. Considered from this point of view, Aqqad's portrayal of the 1919 revolution as the event that took Sa'ad Zaghlul by surprise was the first attempt to separate the 1919 uprising from the elites while giving it a positive assessment, and as such, it was highly innovative.
- 18 In brief, the rupture was marked either in the formation of the Wafd in 1918 or the institution of the parliamentary life or the adoption of the constitution in 1923 while the 1919 uprising was not considered as *the event* worth of historical inquiry. Naturally, it was these moments that were made into national holidays in pre-1952 Egypt. The 13th of November was commemorated as the National Struggle day to mark the day in 1918 when Sa'ad Zaghlul asked for Egyptian independence. Similarly, the adoption of the constitution was celebrated on the 19th of April. The revolution of 1952 will abrogate these national anniversaries and will place the historical rupture on the uprising of 1919.
- 19 To this overall picture of historical representation of 1919, there is a curious exception which should be viewed as a particular case: it is Muhammad Sabry's book entitled *La Révolution Égyptienne* written as his doctoral dissertation at the Sorbonne University in 1922. Sabry was the first historian who chose the 1919 uprising as the main subject of history. In order to explain this innovative vision born at the time when Egyptian historiographical field was dominated either by a royal or Wafd-centered history, two complementary arguments could be proposed. First of all, Sabry's doctoral study was realized under the supervision of François Aulard, official republican historian of the French revolution. Sabry's book was intended to celebrate the birth of Egyptian republic through the revolution, following the example of the French Revolution¹⁵. Thus, the vision of the 1919 uprising as "la fille de la Révolution Française" should be read in the context of republican intellectual environment that Aulard and his colleagues created. The parallels drawn by Sabry between the French Revolution and the uprising of 1919 were certainly influenced, if not determined, by the official ideology of the French Revolution implying that the French revolutionary experience would inevitably spread and repeat itself in the international area. Secondly, while considering Sabry's work, we

should bear in mind that at that time the Wafd was still in process of negotiation for Egyptian independence. In doing so, the delegation heavily relied on its propaganda activities intended to the French intellectual and political community, which, as the main rival of Great Britain in the world-wide colonial contest showed itself more receptive to the idea of Egyptian independence. As a secretary of the Wafd in Paris, Sabry could have written the book in order to garner French intellectuals' support for the Egyptian independence¹⁶. However that may be, his book might have never been translated into Arabic and his readership in Egypt might have been limited. In 1927 Sabry published a history book in Arabic in which, following the fashion of other Egyptian historians of that time, he stopped his historical account with the period of the World War I while reserving to the 1919 uprising not more than last two pages...

1952 revolution: culmination of the revolutionary spirit

- 20 After World War II, the historical representation of Egyptian past began to shift. First of all, we observe a growing interest to the Urabi revolt and the uprising of 1919, both of which increasingly are considered as revolutions and not as mere revolts. But their historical assessment was different. While the Urabi revolt was portrayed in a positive light as the first genuine national and popular revolution, the 1919 revolution was increasingly viewed as a partial success if not a total failure. Precisely, its flaws were attributed to the Wafd and Sa'ad Zaghlul's leadership while its partial success was placed on the Wafd main rivals' merit, the National Party led by Mustapha Kamel.
- 21 The first book devoted to the 1919 uprising was published by a prolific historian and a former member of the National Party, Abd al Rahmad al Rafii in 1946 under the title of *The Revolution of 1919. The National Egyptian History 1914-1921*. The whole book could be read as an attempt to evaluate whether the revolution was a success or failure and it concludes with the idea that it was "a partial success". A year later al Rafii published the first volume of the second book on the subject, named *In the Aftermath of the Egyptian Revolution: the Revolution of 1919*, in which he devoted a whole chapter to "the faults of Sa'ad Zaghlul". In 1949, he published the second edition of the book on Urabi revolt (*the Urabi Revolution and British Occupation*), first edited in 1937, and in its introduction he tied the revolt into a greater historical sequence of Egyptian revolutions, a dimension that was absent in the first edition. Moreover, contrary to the introduction of 1937's edition, he did not evoke "the errors of its leadership" leaving a generally positive assessment of Urabi revolt.
- 22 If Rafii's views on the 1919 revolution and Sa'ad Zaghlul could be attributed to his loyalty to the Nationalist Party which still competed with the Wafd for the domination in the nationalist narrative, he was by no means the sole historian who promoted such a historical vision. In a study published in 1946 under the tile of *The Socialist Order. Exposition, Analysis and Critics*, two scholars, Ahmad Abd al Hamid and Rashid al Barawi, presented a similar vision. According to it, one class, the bourgeoisie, appropriated the national event for its aims and benefits and once they were achieved, it discarded the majority of the people leaving them to poverty, ignorance and unemployment. As for Urabi's revolt, a groundbreaking study was produced in 1947 by Mahmoud Khafif, entitled *Ahmad Urabi, the Distorted Leader*. By seeking to "correct a distorted image" of Urabi and to clear him from all faults, the author proposed that his revolution should be placed on the same level as the French, American and English revolutions. Moreover, he suggested that

the date of the military demonstration in Abdin palace that started the Urabi's movement should be celebrated in the manner of the 14th of July of the French Revolution. A burgeoning Marxist historian school promoted a similar representation. In a book that could be considered as the first serious attempt to apply a Marxist historian method to the writing of the Egyptian past, *The Development of Capitalism and the Class Struggle in Egypt* by Fu'ad Mursi (1949), the author portrayed Urabi's revolt as a revolution which was "halted" by the forces of reaction. Likewise, during the 1919 uprising, the diverse interests of the bourgeoisie and its fear for a Bolshevik-style revolution "postponed" the socialist revolution, hence, the partial success of the 1919 revolution. Even the royalist historians as Shafiq Ghurbal started to take interest in revolutionary history of Egypt by acknowledging the value of revolutions in general and the shortcomings of the 1919 in particular¹⁷. Finally, the same Tawfik al Hakim who in 1933 celebrated the 1919 revolution in his *The Return of the Spirit*, starts to acknowledge in 1945 that the achievements of the revolution were partial and provisional because it lacked a clearly defined social program

¹⁸.

- 23 Apart from a rediscovery of Urabi's revolution and the thesis of the partial success of the 1919, we observe a renewal of the revolutionary idea in these historical works. All successive Egyptian revolts against the occupation, whether the French in 1798 or the British one from 1882 until now, are represented as different moments of the same and constant revolution, which was continuously "halted", "postponed" or "diverted" from its right course. The Revolution became the organizing principle of the entire Egyptian history providing the meaning and explanation to the country's past as well as the means of action for its future.
- 24 How to explain such a radical shift in historiographical representation? It could be explained by political changes that took place after the Second World War. Frustrated ambitions for Egypt's independence resulted in a renewal of nationalist movement and the subsequent radicalization of political life. A number of events marked the period from 1946 until 1952 leading to the fall of the existing political order, dominated by the King and the Wafd party, to its symbolic and material fall. The bloody repression of student demonstration on the bridge Abbas in 1946, the lost war in Palestine in 1948 and the fire of Cairo in January 1952 were the events that prepared the ground for the coup of Free Officers in 1952. The decline of the existing political order resulted in the need of an alternative nationalist narrative. It was provided by left-leaning intellectuals fascinated by the Soviet revolutionary model who diffused new concepts, paradigms and leftist ideological and revolutionary passions. In a very short span of time, the revolutionary imaginary accompanied by the discourse of corruption of elites and the action of masses replaced the legalist and reformist option that prevailed up till then. The conviction that the economic exploitation and political colonization were causally related came to prevail giving birth to the call for a "two stage revolution", political and social, that would put an end to both the capitalism and British occupation. The term *thawra* became ubiquitous and witnessed a radical transformation of its meaning: while in the past it was perceived as a set of violent acts, now it came to denote the process of regime change and the creation of a new political order. To put it differently, it acquired European meaning of the revolution.
- 25 Thus, paradoxically, the belief that the existing political order was created by the 1919 uprising became commonplace. As a result, following the loss of the credibility in this regime, the idea of the "postponement" or "abortion" of the 1919 revolution came to

prevail. The “failure” of the 1919 was not proclaimed, for the revolution can never fail because of its continuous nature. Otherwise it can not be considered as the revolution.

- 26 In this manner, the ideological ground for the coming of the next revolution was already ready for the military coup led by the Free Officers in July 1952. All the new military regime had to do was to inscribe their coup d'état in the succession of numerous revolutionary attempts by presenting their own action as the final and culminating revolution. Radically simplified, the national history was reduced to a continuum of revolutionary moments, which, even if unsuccessful, were now celebrated as triumphant because of the final victory of the 1952. The historical representation that appeared in the aftermath of the Second World War provided the “1952 revolution” with fundamental symbolic and ideological “needs” of every revolution, namely the necessity of rupture and of continuity.
- 27 First of all, the Free Officers completed the undergoing process of recovery of Urabi revolt by presenting themselves as direct successors of his revolutionary endeavour. As for the 1919 revolution, it was declared as “the unfinished revolution”. As we have seen, for the pre-1952 regime, the rupture meant first and foremost the emergence of the national leader Saad Zaghlul and achievements of the Wafd. In order to mark the rupture with the previous political order, named “the ancient regime”, the architects of the 1952 coup, discredited the role of the Wafd. At the same time, responding to the need to inscribe their revolution into continuity, the Free Officers replaced the rupture in the 1919 popular uprising the merit of which was given to the main rivals of the Wafd, the National Party and its leader Mustapha Kamel. In such a way, the legitimacy and the revolutionary character of the 1919 uprising were saved.
- 28 The rupture of the 1952 revolution was marked in a radical and absolute manner. The mere banishment of the King was perceived as the end of the old order and an already completed realization of the goals of the new age¹⁹. As Salwa Ismael demonstrated by deconstructing Nasser's public discourses, the detachment of “now” from “then” was represented as the movement from the past of dispossession to one of the acquisition. Furthermore, the whole focus was put on the destruction of the old system rather than the construction of the new one as expressed in such overused revolutionary slogans of “destruction of the feudalism” and “ending of political exploitation”²⁰. Because of the opposition of the “now” to “then”, the future was reduced to the present which came to dominate the revolutionary discourse, while the past was harnessed to the purpose of the present.
- 29 If the rupture represents a crucial need for every revolution in order to present itself as the beginning of “the new age”, the same applies to the principle of continuity. The necessity of the continuity stems from the very idea of revolution perceived as a unique and eternally continuous movement which was repeatedly repressed by enemy forces in the past. Such a representation of the event provides it with a universal character. Thus, by presenting themselves as direct successors of the Urabi revolt and the “unfinished” revolution of 1919, the Free Officers affirmed the continuous and culminating nature of their revolution, which, otherwise, would lose its universal and, hence, revolutionary character.
- 30 It is important, however, to note that such a representation of the past and the present can not be merely reduced to conscious moves undertaken by the regime in order to reshape history for its ideological purposes. The Egyptian case would suggest, on the contrary, that these reinterpretations were already underway after the Second World

War and before the actual change of power and that the newly established regime did no more than to appropriate, simplify and make it official. The atmosphere of a tense revolutionary anticipation that marked the aftermath of the Second World War has certainly convinced the Free Officers themselves that they were carrying out the genuine Egyptian revolution. Given this fact, we could suppose that it was in this the pre-coup period that the rupture took place generating the shared feeling that the old era had finished although the new one had not arrived yet.

Conclusion

- 31 In the preceding pages, I have endeavoured to show that what is known today as Egyptian revolutions of Ahmad Urabi and of 1919 became the revolutions meaning historical ruptures only in the late 40's when growing discredit of the regime and the search of an alternative nationalist narrative coincided with the spread of a new revolutionary imaginary. After the coup in 1952, the Free Officers unified and made official the historical vision according to which Egyptian nation was living in a permanent state of revolution. Because of the fundamental needs of every revolution, the necessity of continuity and that of rupture, the Free Officers were confronted with a dilemma with regard to the 1919 revolution: how to mark at the same time the continuity with the revolution and the rupture with the regime created by the revolution? This dilemma was resolved by the thesis of unfinished revolution.
- 32 Contemporary rivalry between political parties claiming the heritage of the two revolutions is paradoxical. Despite the negative assessment of the 1919 uprising at the time of its occurring, the Wafd party places the rupture on this moment, thus confirming the historical representation established by the 1952 revolution with which it now competes. This competition suggests as well that the idea of unique and permanent revolution still acts in reading of Egyptian history by maintaining that two "finished" revolutions can not occur in a country's history. Moreover, the existence of these competing narratives confirms the general absence of established meaning of the *thawra*: is it the transformation of political and social structures led by the state from above, a definition found in 1952 revolution, or is it a popular uprising seeking for the change, as expressed by 1919 revolution? The confusion of these two meanings, *thawra* as a profound social and political change, and *thawra* as a mean of contest, makes the conciliation of the two revolutions a difficult task.

NOTES

1. For shifts in Urabi's revolt historical representation see T. MAYER, *The Changing Past : Egyptian Historiography of the Urabi revolt (1882-1883)*, Gainesville, University of Florida Press, 1988.
2. Yoav DI-CAPUA, *Gatekeepers of the Arab Past. Historians and History Writing in Twentieth-Century Egypt*, Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2009

3. On Urabi revolt see Juan R. I. COLE, *Colonialism and Revolution in the Middle East: Social and Cultural Origins of Egypt's 'Urabi Movement*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993.
4. A. ISHAQ, "Harakat al Afkar", *al - Durar*, Al-Matba'at al Adabiya, Beirut, 1909, p. 103-106.
5. On Egyptian colloquial culture and its role in nationalist movement see Ziad FAHMY, *Popularizing Egyptian Nationalism: Colloquial Culture and Media Capitalism, 1870-1919*, unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Arizona, 2007.
6. "Thank God, the era of *Tankit wa Tabkit* is over and our entry into the era of liberty and knowledge of [our] rights obliged us to change the name of our journal", *Tankit wa Tabkit*, No. 19, 23 October, 1881.
7. Paul De BAIGNIERES (éd.), *L'Egypte Satirique*, Paris, 1886, p. 15-16, cited in M. MOOSA, "Ya'qub Sanu' and the Rise of Arab Drama in Egypt", *IJMES*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Sept., 1974), p. 401-433. It seems, however, that the Urabi movement started to be called "the Egyptian Revolution" in France not before British occupation of Egypt in 1882. In 1881-1882, French authorities were rather negative about the movement for it threatened their own interests in Egypt: See Nadim's attack against an anti-Urabist article published in a French magazine in "al Dunya wa al Arab", *Tankit wa Tabkit*, No. 19, 23 October, 1881.
8. See Anne-Laure DUPONT, *Gurgi Zaydan : (1861-1914), Ecrivain réformiste et témoin de la Renaissance arabe*, Damas, IFPO, 2006, p. 238-241.
9. For instance, Mustapha KAMEL, *al Mas'alat al Sharqiya*, Cairo, Matba' al Adab, 1898, p. 216-257.
10. *Ibid*, p. 143.
11. Salim AL NAQQASH (d. 1884) devoted the volumes 4 and 5 to the Urabi movement of his *Misr li al Misriyin* (Egypt for Egyptians), written in 1884 and published in Alexandria.
12. Though Abd al Rahman al Rafii was denied access to the Abidin archive following the publication of his *Tarikh al Harakat al Qawmiya wa Tatawur Nizam al Hukm* in 1929, three years later he wrote a book on the age of khedive Isma'il entitled *Asr Isma'il*. The distribution of the book was banned in its turn. However that may be, both of these books dealt with the 19th century history. Yoav DI-CAPUA, *Gatekeepers of the Arab Past*, op. cit., p. 164.
13. Tellingly, the arguments of al Aqqad rested either on the lack of proves of such incidents or on its defensive character. The justification of violence in terms of necessity for change was rare. A. M. AQQAD, *Sa'ad Zaghlul: Za'im al Thawra*, Cairo, Kitab al Hilal, 1988.
14. Significant in this regard is Salama Musa who used the term of revolution (*thawra*) to denote both the 1919 uprising, which he condemned, and the reformist actions of the khedive of Isma'il Pacha, which he praised: See Salama MUSA, *Fi al Hayat wa al Adab*, p. 55, cited in Vernon EGGER, *A Fabian in Egypt, Salama Musa and the rise of professional classes in Egypt, 1909-1939*, Langham MD, University Press of America, 1986 p. 91.
15. Sabry draws a number of parallels between "the Egyptian Revolution" and the French one (Egyptian peasants resembled to French peasants, the khedive Tawfiq was like Louis XVI, etc.).
16. This thesis is supported by his contemporary historian Mahmud Abu al Fath in *Egyptian Question and the Wafd*, 1922, p. 146. As we have already seen, in 1890's French colleagues of an Egyptian intellectual based in Paris Ya'qub Sannu already considered the Urabi revolt as "the Egyptian Revolution". The extent to which French intellectuals were drawing parallels between the French Revolution and the Egyptian uprisings by employing the term of "the Egyptian Revolution" with the aim of countering Great Britain's colonial ambitions needs a deeper investigation.
17. In his book entitled *History of Egyptian-British Negotiations, 1882-1936*, published in the beginning of 1952, he stated with regard of the 1919 uprising : "The revolution is an angry outburst of honour, its story is a story of bravery which cannot be measured, its beauty of clear, pure sacrifice, it was carried out without fear by boys and girls, youths, men and women, they all forgot their religious and social differences and cared only for Egypt", p. 49, cited in Anthony

GORMAN, *Historians, State and Politics in 20th Century Egypt*, Oxon and New York, Routledge Courzon, p. 114. Later, in his book *The Making of Egypt*, he recognized shortcomings of the 1919: "The hopes for the national rebirth were not fulfilled. We paid the people in words. We were selfish and we were cynics. We had less excuse than our fathers at the debacle of 1882, because we built on what they left and we could have learned of their mistakes", p. 55, cited in GORMAN, *Ibid*, p. 115.

18. I. GERSHONI, "An Intellectual Source for the Revolution: Tawfik al Hakim's Influence on Nasser and His Generation", in Shimon SHAMIR (ed.), *Egypt from Monarchy to Republic: A Reassessment of Revolution and Change*, Westview Press, 1995, p. 230.

19. In his public speech of 1954, Gamal Abd al Nasser, the leader of the revolution, stated: "since July 23 (the day of coup d'état), each individual began to feel free in the country in which his rights are equal to those of others".

20. S. ISMAIL, « Revolutionary Discourse in Nasser's Egypt », in Marc ANGENOT (dir.) *Discours Politiques Aujourd'hui*, Summer-Autumn, 1992, p. 175.

ABSTRACTS

L'histoire de l'Égypte moderne est riche en événements « révolutionnaires » : la révolte d'Ahmad Urabi en 1882, l'insurrection populaire en 1919 et le coup d'Etat des Officiers Libres en 1952. En étudiant la manière dont ces événements ont été perçus au moment de leur avènement, je propose que leur redéfinition en tant que « révolutions » est un phénomène récent, lié à des transformations déclenchées après la Seconde Guerre mondiale. Le nouvel imaginaire révolutionnaire, qui se diffuse à ce moment sous influence des idées de gauche, est adopté par la population en quête d'une nouvelle idéologie contestataire pour faire face au régime monarchique en discrédit croissant. C'est en ce moment que s'opère la redéfinition du terme arabe polysémique *al thawra* : le sens positif de « la révolution » vient à éclipser son sens de « l'insurrection populaire », lieu d'évaluations négatives au début du XX^e siècle.

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Mots-clés: Révolution, Égypte, représentation, rupture, histoire

AUTHOR

GIEDRE SABASEVICIUTE

PhD Student in Sociology

EHESS, Paris

giebox[at]gmail.com